

A TERRIBLE CHRISTMAS-EVE.

By M. H. Preston.

TWO or three years ago, in the best possible spirits and with the happiest auspices, I took my seat in a first-class railway carriage at London Road Station, Manchester, with a ticket in my pocket which proclaimed my destination to be far south. It was the night before Christmas Eve, at about eleven o'clock, for I remember the train started 11.20. The huge station was filled with noise bustling life; groups of all classes of people hustled and jostled each on the platform; snorting engines puffed, roared, and screamed; trains were continually arriving and departing; porters were crying incessantly "By your leave!" and wheeling ponderous trucks laden with Christmas hampers, barrels of oysters, canvas-covered hams, crates of oranges, boxes of cheeses, baskets of game, trunks, parcels, packages of every shape and size. Here and there some aristocratic individual would walk calmly through the bustling crowd, and take his seat in a previously-engaged compartment, while his less fortunate fellow-creatures jostled and scrambled for their places. On the whole however it was a good-humored crowd, nearly every face in it bearing that expression of cheerfulness and good humor that seems peculiar to Christmastide.

As to myself, I felt brimming over with good fellowship towards all mankind—so much so that I had not the least objection to taking a seat in a carriage that was occupied by two spiteful-looking maiden ladies and a fat elderly gentleman, who stormed at everybody in general, and the railway-porters in particular; and in the fulness of my heart I even hastened to open the door as the train was on the point of moving, to admit a harassed delicate-looking young woman with a very young baby in her arms and a child of two or three years dragging at her skirts—for which piece of benevolence I received some withering glances from the two spinsters and a wrathful growl from the stout gentleman.

None of these little incidents disturbed the serenity of my mind. I acknowledged frowns and sour glances with a conciliatory smile, made room for the young mother and her charges, leaned back in the carriage, and indulged in a delightful reverie—for

there was bliss in store for me at the termination of my journey. I was going to spend Christmas with the dearest creature in the whole world—the sweetest blue-eyed darling that ever gladdened the eyes of a man and a lover, who, moreover, lived in one of the cosiest, merriest, most hospitable country-houses in Kent, and had the most amiable and sensible of parents, the merriest, most good-natured of sisters, and the jolliest brothers in the universe. Not only did I anticipate spending a delightfully happy Christmas, but I was looking forward to a still greater joy; for on New Year's Day we were going to be married at the little village church of Briarly, and after that I was to take my bride home to a fine new house near Manchester, where everything was so bright, luxurious, and pretty, that I was sure my darling would be enraptured with it; and I knew it needed only the sunshine of her dear presence to make it the happiest home in the world.

I was in what most people would call "easy circumstances"—not a millionaire, but a long way from being poor. I was the owner of a manufactory, and received a very satisfactory annual balance-sheet from the hands of my accountant; there seemed therefore to be no cloud on my mental horizon, no cares for the future to disturb the happiness of my reverie, as the train rushed on through the darkness.

I was too excited to sleep, though the stout old gentleman soon exchanged his irascible growls for heavy snores plainly audible above the din and rattle of the train. The spinsters on the opposite seat sat very erect and rigid for some time; but presently there was a vacant expression in the eyes of one; then her eyelids drooped, her head sank back, and she slept with wide-open mouth and a somewhat more subdued snore than her *vis-a-vis*. Far more decorous was the behavior of her companion; she still maintained her upright position, though her head nodded spasmodically, and she struggled gallantly to keep her eyes open.

The two babies, I was glad to observe, were both sleeping quietly—one in the mother's arms, and the other stretched along the seat with his head in her lap. I

ventured to spread my rug over his plump mottled legs, and in return received a look of gratitude from the pale, tired-looking mother which brought about rather an uncomfortable feeling of lightness at my throat, and caused me to gaze for some time at the darkened window, down which steamy tears were flowing, reflecting a blurred like of myself.

Thus we traveled on for many miles. Midnight passed, and I became wretchedly cold and hungry, irritable and quarrelsome; a savage desire filled me to pull the sharp frosty nose of my nodding companion, who would not resign herself comfortably to sleep, but still alternately glared and nodded, and was, moreover, afflicted with the most depressing influenza. Each moment my feeling of nervous irritation became intensified, and at last I conceived a morbid idea that I should never survive the miseries of the journey.

Only one incident occurred to break the monotony. I had noticed that the young mother grew rather restless and nervous as we approached the station where the tickets were generally collected; and, when we reached it, and the door was flung open by a surly official, she timidly handed him a third-class ticket, faintly murmuring that all the other carriages were filled before she could secure a seat.

"Oh, come," said the man gruffly—"none of that humbug! Just bundle out of this! You're not going to travel first-class with a third ticket, I can tell you!"

She had hastily roused the sleeping boy, who now roared lustily. But I could not sit there and see the poor tired creature drag her babies into a draughty third-class carriage on such a night. So I interposed, satisfied the ticket collector, and had the gratification of seeing the little family once more settled as comfortable as circumstances would admit.

It was nearly eight o'clock when the raw gray light of dawn struggled in at the carriage window and disclosed to each of us our haggard woe-begone faces; and a few minutes later the train drew slowly into another bustling station, where we all alighted and dispersed. What social amiable individuals we had proved to be! After the usual manner of English travelers, we five people—not including the babies—had been shut up together through a whole night, and, with the exception of the young mother's warm ex-

pression of gratitude for the small service I had rendered her, none of us had spoken an agreeable word; and we parted as mutely as we had traveled.

I was soon seated before a blazing fire in the coffee-room of the railway hotel, where I consoled myself for the night's miseries with steak and kidneys, cold fowl, *et-cætera*. After doing ample justice to this repast, I dozed in a comfortable arm-chair for an hour before I resumed my journey. The arrival of my train was announced at last; and, after another period of chill discomfort, I reached the pretty rustic station of Briarly.

Craning my neck out of the carriage window, I beheld a bright smiling face under a coquettish fur hat, and in another moment had clasped in my arms a dear little figure in a ruby-colored dress and warm sealskin jacket, receiving a mock rebuke for so frightful a proceeding in so public a place. I did not feel abashed. The station-master and the porters of Briarly Station were well acquainted with me and with the interesting object of my visit; and, as for the strangers who had left the train and were marching along the platform, what did I care for them?

"Now then, Mr. John Hope, if you can condescend to notice any one less interesting than Blanche, here are Hattie and I ready to wish you a Merry Christmas, and many of 'em!"

I turned to greet my future brother-in-law Ted, the eldest of Blanche's brothers, and his sister Hattie, and for a few minutes we kept up a delightful clatter with our talk and laughter.

"I must hurry off to 'The Maypole,'" I said at last. "and rid myself of this railway grim, before I can put in an appearance at Sunnymede. I see Jones has taken possession of my luggage."

Blanche's home being crowded with Christmas and wedding guests, and her mother having very rigid notions of propriety, it was deemed expedient for me to take up my quarters at the village inn; to which I could not have the slightest objection, as I knew from experience that "The Maypole" was one of the most comfortable and delightful of homely old-fashioned country inns, distant only half a mile from Sunnymede Grange.

"You will not be long before you join us, will you, Jack?" said Blanche, as we parted at the corner of the lane leading to "The

Maypole;" and they turned in another direction towards home. "We dine at eight to-night—a litter on your account—and we are to have a carpet-dance until the waits come."

"Yes; hurry up, Jack!" cried Ted. "We'll have a regular jolly Christmas-Eve. Ta-ta for the present!"

"I'll be with you in an hour, or less," I said, as I strode off.

When I reached the inn, I found that my luggage had already arrived and been placed in my bed-room, where a bright fire burned. Everything wore a cheerful air of expectation and welcome which was very grateful to a tired traveler. The cause of my visit to Briarly was as well known at the inn as at the railway-station, or anywhere else in the little primitive village, for that matter. This was not by any means my first appearance at Briarly, which had been a most attractive place during the fifteen months of my engagement, and even before that eventful period, so I was welcomed all around with smiling faces and good wishes. Landlord and landlady, chamber-maid and waiter, ostler, stable-boy, cook, sculley-maid—each and all contrived to have a peep at or exchange a greeting with Miss Blanche Warren's "intended"; and it was with a feeling of satisfaction and something like self-importance that I sat down in a comfortable old-fashioned easy-chair before the bed-room fire to regale myself with a cup of strong coffee before commencing my toilet.

As I sat there, it occurred to me that this was a good opportunity for inspecting the presents I had brought, and to assure myself of the safety of the diamond bracelet intended for Blanche. Not that I had any doubt about the matter, because I had kept the case containing these treasures in my charge all through my journey; it was more for the gratification of looking at the beautiful ornament and imagining its effect on the snowy round arm for which it was intended.

Unlocking a small hand-bag, I drew forth the morocco case, and, opening it, gazed with delight at the glittering band.

"Blanche will be pleased," I said to myself; "it will sparkle on her dear arm on our wedding-day—bless her! I should like to load her with diamonds, or anything else the heart of woman most desires."

Then I drew forth other cases—a diamond brooch for mamma-in-law, a pin set with the same precious stones for papa-in-law, gold

lockets with monograms for the girls, and studs for the boys. They were all right, and all, as I hoped, handsome and suitable. I had intended presenting them on the morrow Christmas-Day; but, as I gazed at them, I changed my mind, and decided to take them with me that night. I never could postpone a pleasure, and I wanted to see Blanche's face brighten and her eyes sparkle at her new treasure. No I could not wait until the morrow.

As I sat sipping my coffee I mused over our courtship, and thought of the last summer but one, when my college chum Ted Warren had invited me down to his father's place at Briarly to fish, and otherwise kill the idle hours of my holiday. Oh! that glorious summer-time—the fun the merriment we had in that hospitable house! How distracted I felt among the bevy of pretty sisters, until one seemed to shine out from among the rest, and I fell over head and ears in love with Blanche! The course of our love, true as it was, proved the exception to the rule, and ran as smoothly as the stream in which Ted and I fished. My prospects were good, and Blanche loved me, I believe, almost as much as I loved her; I had no rival except an imaginary one in the person of a bluff florid young squire, who caused me some pangs for a few days at the beginning of our acquaintance, but who was, I found, engaged to Blanche's eldest sister, Mary. Mr. and Mrs. Warren gave a complacent consent, and before the end of the summer my darling and I were engaged.

Musing thus in front of the fire, I grew somewhat drowsy; but at length, rousing myself with an effort, I put the presents into my pocket and started off towards Sunnymede Grange.

Part of the road skirted a plantation called Briarly Wood, almost large and dense enough to be called a forest. To walk to Sunnymede by the road was to make a considerable *detour*, but a path through the wood cut off a corner and shortened the distance of about a quarter of a mile.

As I had stayed rather too long at the inn and the appointed dinner-hour was fast approaching, I decided to go by the shorter way, and passed through the little moss-grown gate leading into the wood. Very dark and uninviting it looked as I gazed into its black depths and heard the dreary soughings of the wind among the gaunt leafless branches overhead. For a few moments I

hesitated, and then, with a laugh at my nervousness, plunged into the darkness, my feet slipping over the wet spongy grass. Before I had got halfway through the wood however I repented of my folly; my boots were wet, and I was splashed with mud almost up to my eyes. A fit state I should be in to present myself before the assembled guests! What a fool I was, I thought, not to have kept to the road, even had it been twice the distance! That was comparatively dry and hard, while this was like floundering through a morass—a perfect Slough of Despond! Suddenly, to my deep disgust, I found I had lost the path, and was wandering about aimlessly among undergrowth and bracken. Was I to ramble about there all night, while Blanche grew frantic at my non-appearance? I thought I knew the path by heart, for it was in this very wood I had proposed to my darling and received her shy whisper of consent. That was in the summer-time, with the sunshine streaming down between the leaves, with the birds singing, butterflies flitting to and fro, and flowers filling the air with their fragrance; now, in the darkness, gloomy-looking trees black and sombre like ghostly figures, suggesting thoughts of gnomes and goblins.

"What a fool you must have been!" I said for the hundredth time. I had to walk warily, for I felt sure I was close to Blackman's Pool. I thought I recollected a certain clump of trees beneath which we held a picnic during the preceding summer; and I remembered that we pulled ourselves about in a little punt on the pool, which Frank declared to be thirty or forty feet deep in some places. Very lovely it looked on that summer day, with the setting sun shining upon it, turning its waters to gold; but what a black, inky, horrible pool to fall into on Christmas-Eve!

I then remembered having seen a cottage close by among the trees, and was just wondering if I was near and whether its inmates could direct me, when I heard a rustling among the bracken, and saw a woman flying towards me, wringing her hands in distress.

"Oh, sir, what merciful providence has sent you here just now? My husband has had an accident, and is lying on the floor of our cottage. Oh, he will die! I can't move him, and there is not a soul with me to fetch the doctor. Do come and help me for the love of heaven!"

Without pausing to inquire into the nature of the accident, I hastily followed the woman, who walking along rapidly, soon led me to the door of a crazy tumble-down hut. A light shone through a very small window, and I noticed what a wretched, ill-conditioned hovel it appeared. I passed inside, and, to my astonishment, the woman carefully locked the door, and then disappeared. I looked round for the wounded man whom I had come to aid, but saw no signs of such a being. Then followed the most dreadful experience I ever passed through. Without a warning sound, I felt myself suddenly seized from behind and pinioned; my legs were then tied, and I was thrown violently to the floor. I saw that my captors were two powerful villainous-looking men, and at the first glimpse of their faces all hope seemed to die within me. I offered what resistance I could, but was helpless in their hands.

In an outburst of wild but impotent rage I demanded to know for what purpose I had been decoyed thither, and ordered them to set me at liberty instantly.

"Not if we know it!" said one of the men, with an oath. "Yer don't get away that easy, my fine fellar, I bet! It's not so often we catch the likes o' you. We must see the color o' yer money; and my mate here's taken a fancy to this fine watch and chain. I'd like these studs, and this flash ring, so we'll relieve you o' 'em. I'd advise yer to hold yer jaw too, or I'll have to show you how."

The other man was busy searching my pockets; and, as I felt his hand on the case of jewels, I could not refrain from uttering a loud cry for help, although I knew how worse than useless it was. Instantly I received a blow which loosened my teeth and made my mouth bleed.

"What—yer won't hold yer row? Then we'll make yer!" said my assailant, trying a filthy red handkerchief over my mouth as a gag, and then proceeded with his search for booty.

They were soon gloating over the diamonds and the other jewels, spreading them on the rickety table and turning them over with their vile fingers. It was agony to me to see in such hands the pretty gems with which I had anticipated adorning my darling. Then I began to hope, since they had obtained a larger booty than they expected, they would set me free; but I soon found,

from snatches of their whispered conversation, that such was far from their intention; and my heart sickened as I heard such scraps "Stun him! Pitch him into th' pool! Dead men tell no tales! Finish the job proper!"

Cold perspiration poured down my face and the dingy room appeared to swim round me as I thought of my poor little love waiting so anxiously for me, while I lay in deadly peril. How she would watch and wait and hope, and then despair! I thought of the inquiries, the fruitless search, the grief for me and wonder as to my fate. And then at last they would find my dead body rotting in yonder black ghastly pool.

In the midst of my terror I vaguely noted everything in the room—the rough unplastered walls and the stains which the rain had made in trickling through the crevices, the low roof, the rude brick fireplace, the three-legged round table at which sat the two men on rough wooden stools or benches. I noticed also a gun in one corner, and a thick heavy club or stick; an iron crowbar lay on the floor, and an old-fashioned dark lantern hung against the wall.

Then I began to wonder what had become of the woman who had so basely decoyed and trapped me; and while I wondered she entered the room, and I saw she was pale-faced, dark-haired, and had a terrible bruise over one eye. She uttered a loud exclamation of delight at sight of the jewelry; and one of the men roughly told her to put away the spoil while they "finished the job" and got rid of me.

I saw the woman's face turn a shade paler; and, glancing uneasily at me, she muttered a few hasty sentence, among which I detected the words, "Not in the house then!"

The man swore angrily at her, and called her a fool, but seemed about to comply with her wishes, for drawing on a heavy great-coat and taking the thick club, he and the other man lifted me up between them and carried me out of the hut.

Oh, the agony of that moment! I prayed then as I had never prayed before.

We reached the pool, and they put me down among the sodden grass at its edge. I could feel the water lapping and washing over my feet, as though impatient to draw me in, while the two men held a consultation, one wanting to throw me in as I was, and the other brute contending that "it would be safer to finish him off with a crack" before committing me to the lake. I listened

with a horrible anxiety; but at length they decided that it would be impossible for me to escape, pinioned as I was; and, if, on the other hand, they beat out my brains, there might be ugly marks left on the ground to betray them.

Having come to this decision, they lifted me from the ground and swung me to and fro to insure my falling in a good distance away from the bank; and then I closed my eyes while I was flung out, and immediately afterwards felt myself sinking, sinking, sinking— There was a crash! I opened my eyes again, and found myself not at the bottom of Blackman's Pool, but stretched at full length across the hearthrug of my bedroom at "The Maypole," with my head among the fire-irons.

"Thank heaven!" I exclaimed fervently, as I rose to my feet and looked round with a bewildered stare. "Thank heaven, it was only a dream!"

Yes; it was only a dream! I was in the dear old familiar room; there were the cases of jewels lying open on the dressing-table, my empty coffee-cup had fallen from my hand and rolled under the grate, and I was in dressing-gown and slippers. There, beside the jewels, lay the coveted watch; and—oh, the pity of it!—its hands pointed to thirty minutes past ten, and the dinner-hour at Sunnymede was eight o'clock. Blanche would be frantic!

Hastily I washed, shaved, dressed, and adorned myself, gathered up my treasures, rushed down-stairs, and in the fullness of my heart gave the landlord a fervent grip of the hand, wished him a Merry Christmas, and ordered an unlimited supply of punch for the whole of the rustic company at the bar to drink my health. I then ran off, leaving the good folk of "The Maypole" very much in doubt as to my sanity.

I avoided the path through Briarly Wood, and kept to the road, walking as fast as I possibly could. I soon reached the Grange, through the windows of which shone a brilliant light, casting a cheery glow out into the dark night. My entrance caused a sensation even among the servants in the hall, and in a few minutes I was surrounded by a cluster of white-robed ladies and gentlemen in evening-dress, and my pretty Blanche was sobbing hysterically in my arms, while I frantically endeavored to answer a score of questions at once.

"It's all right," I said; "I couldn't help

it! I've had an adventure; and if you'll take your seats quietly by the fire, I'll tell you all about it."

We all grouped ourselves around the huge fire in the library, the light of which shone upon the expectant faces of young and old Warrens, of cousins, aunts and uncles, and sweethearts, while the pictured faces of the dead-and-gone Warrens glowed in the fire-light as if they too participated in the general joy and gladness.

Blanche nestled on a low chair close by my side, with her hand clasped in mine, as if to feel quite sure of my actual presence; and, as I glanced at her sweet loving face and thought what her tender heart would have suffered had my dream been a reality, I could not repress a shudder.

All were eager to hear my story, and I could not resist the temptation of harrowing their feelings; so I began to tell the tale as if my adventure in dreamland had really happened in Briarly Wood. As I proceeded however to dilate on the horrors of my situation in the cottage, I perceived, to my dismay, that I was scarcely making the impression I desired. The ladies looked properly horrified and very much impressed; but I detected an expression of incredulous amusement on the face of Ted and his brothers. My respected father-in-law-elect appeared sternly indignant, and evidently suspected me of having imbibed a stronger liquid than coffee. Worse than all, my darling seemed about to swoon; so, relinquishing my desire for sensation, I came hastily to the end of my story, and, finding it necessary to place my arm around Blanche's waist, assured her that it was after all nothing but a dream.

"Poor boy!" said Mrs. Warren, the only considerate creature in the whole assembly, with the exception of my dear one. "No wonder you were fatigued after such a dreary journey, and— Dear me, how thoughtless we are! You have had no dinner, and yet we have kept you to explain all this! My dear Jack, I'm sure you must feel faint!"

Away bustled the dear motherly old lady in her black satin and rich lace, not content to ring the bell and consign me to the mercy of a servant, but she herself superintending the preparation of a substantial dinner, daintily set out in the pretty little breakfast-room, where, with Blanche for my sole companion, I prolonged the entertainment until we were ruthlessly summoned to listen to

the waits. Then we all gathered together at the drawing-room windows and listened to the group of village choirsters singing of "peace and good will towards men," with such taste and sweetness that I felt proud to think that Blanche had been their choir-mistress. Before the singers had finished I found her shedding tears.

"Not unhappy ones," she assured me.

No words could adequately describe that Christmas Day, or the merry happy week which followed. The weather changed suddenly from cold and dampness to a hard sharp frost, we made the Sunnymede meadows ring with our shouts and laughter as we skated on all the surrounding ponds. We acted charades, tableaux, and plays, sang and danced till the days flew by so rapidly that they seemed like a sunny dream.

On the wedding-morning the wintry sun lighted up the old village church, where the Christmas decorations had been suffered to remain in my darling's honor. It streamed in through the stained windows on the shining holly and laurel, falling on the white dresses of Blanche and her bridesmaids. My little bride looked like a winter fairy, enveloped in a cloud of some mysterious delicate white material, with soft ruffles of lace about her throat and wrists. The diamond bracelet figured conspicuously.

I took an early opportunity of asking Ted who were the inmates of the cottage in Briarly Wood, for I had a superstitious impression that the place was haunted by ruffians.

"Do I know them?" said Ted, laughing. "To be sure I do! They are an honest hard-working young gamekeeper and his wife, whom I will introduce to you some day. You see we knew your terrible story must be a farce, though you related it with such tragical expression."

The next summer, when on a visit to Sunnymede Grange with my dear little wife, on the occasion of her Sister Mary's marriage to the bluff young squire, we had a picnic in ever-to-be-remembered Briarly Wood, and I made the acquaintance of the young gamekeeper's wife and her fat healthy baby, and found the clean, picturesque, comfortable cottage to be unlike the wretched hovel which I still remembered with a shudder, as the pretty rosy-cheeked smiling young wife was unlike the repulsive-looking woman of my terrible dream.